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# PROSPECTING FOR INTELLIGENCE

BY CAROLINE E. MACGILL

It is one of the oddly humorous twists of our times that few articles on the subject of education are written by those engaged in the process. They are for the most part mutely inglorious, and permit the field to be occupied by those who are entirely on the outside, or those engaged in the administrative end, which, as every teacher knows, is an utterly different thing from the factual life of the schoolroom. Of a dozen recent pronouncements, but one was by a teacher, and she had to put her material in the form of an allegory, or thought she did. Yet it is well to hear from all sides, and perhaps not last from those upon whom the burden and heat of the day is cast. Perhaps they may have something to say for the enlightenment of the nations which at least has the merit of experience back of it.

Consider the Teacher. She—the pronoun feminine is so well-nigh universally applicable that by custom it has become a fixed epithet—lives in a world wherein she is expected to mould minds and manners, morals and memories, teaching everything from an appreciation of art to the practice of the art of the daily bath. For material she has the sons and daughters of those who may or may not be in the habit of saying, “My mind to me a kingdom is,” but in either case she knows it is a kingdom whose royalty is largely in exile. Yet she is the target of every business man, every journalist, every college professor, who wants to know why she cannot turn out a product possessing at least average intelligence.

Now average, ordinary intelligence is about the rarest thing in the world. The really intelligent are the most misunderstood of men. To make a child intelligent is to doom him or her to life-long solitude, to render him the object of hatred of ninety-nine per cent of his fellows, perhaps in the end to meet the fate now handed out to the Russians of that order by the Bolshevik

mob. Is therefore, the cultivation of intelligence really desirable? Go to any meeting of a Chamber of Commerce, or associated manufacturers in any given industry, and listen to the unbelievably funny remarks made. The intelligent men present are like "two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff", and as a rule are shelved as hopelessly impracticable, by their fellows. I listened to an eminent financier, once, at a meeting of supposedly leading men, and watched the weariness grow on his face, as he patiently answered their questions, questions so absurd that one marvelled at the temerity of the proponents. Yet I happened to know that among the number were two or three who were on the school-boards of their respective towns, and without doubt considered themselves highly competent in educational affairs.

Of course that brings up the question of definition. What is intelligence? Mr. Edison has been setting himself up of late as the court of last resort, by means of a series of questions, whose correct answers will enable one to qualify. The active men and women who sell books guaranteed to reach the same goal by an expenditure of fifteen paltry minutes a day, base their arguments on the same principle. An enterprising magazine advertises to produce results by keeping you abreast of the latest revues, post-futurist art, symphonic jazz, and advance tips on styles to be worn in the next century.

Exponents of "old-fashioned" ways place intelligence in due acquaintance with the classics; their more modernistic confrères demand an acquaintance with English literature, a reading knowledge of another modern tongue, and a bowing familiarity at least, with the King James Bible. The scientific and vocational education advocates on the other hand, think anyone can do very well who can figure, read a set of blue-prints, and understand a little chemistry.

As you read, I am sure you recall many who measure up to all these requirements, yet whom you would never think of entrusting with a "message to Garcia". To how many of your acquaintance would you confide an important task, existing in your own ideas only, and expect them to have the imagination to grasp and carry out what you had planned? In the words of Poor Richard, if you want a thing done, do it yourself.

Can we teach intelligence? Not if we do not possess it. We are in a welter of new and pseudo-new educational theories. Clichés like “education for authority”, and “mastery of the arts of life”, undefined and indefinable, hardly understood by their *defensores fidei*, abound and abut on the regions of our minds, like Paddy’s goat. On analysis, most of them resolve into ways of making money and yet more money, and are clearly schemes for the super-child. We are beset by counsels of perfection, to be applied to our school system, state control, junior high schools, departmental work in the grades, pre-vocational classes, special classes for the mentally deficient and super-bright, intelligence tests instead of examinations, etc. The latter seems a bit hard, to examine for a thing which is not on the curriculum!

At the same time, communities are beset to spend money for new and finer buildings, and the nation is hounded for the same end. To what purpose, after all, unless we can be surer of results than we have attained in the past, from the immense sums which have been spent? Another element would abolish the private school, and force democracy, which evidently cannot be trusted to the mass of the citizenry, in their opinion. Yet the number and variety of private schools has increased by leaps and bounds. There must be something behind such a movement besides swollen spending ability.

And there is. What is needed is more special schools, not fewer. If one venture to say it, more class education, not less. Mass education, such as we have suffered under for three generations, can in its nature not educate anyone. It is designed for someone who does not exist, the Average Child. Therefore it meets no actual need, hits nothing squarely, hence is the quintessence of inefficiency. We have scholastic indigestion, in this country, for we have been trying to feed each mind with a stock ration, built on theory. And it is poor business trying out unproved theories on plastic human intelligences.

I use the word *intelligences* advisedly. Any teacher, herself worthy of the name, has had perforce to see intelligence warped and well-nigh destroyed, by processes before which she was helpless, caught in the cogs of a system which was as stupid and un-intelligent as systems usually are. The Infinite Intelligence

which created us made no two on the same model—a very small smattering of biology confirms that—and it is appallingly crass to think such a matter as training the individual mind can be done by mass processes.

It is the fashion of the day to confound education with much knowledge from the world of books. But many highly bookish persons are most unintelligent, outside of the special field they cultivate intensively. Of course that is by no means a condemnation of knowledge gained from books, but merely a suggestion that it touches but one side of the problem. A book—the same book—may serve to deaden the intelligence of everyone in the class, or it may awaken the imagination, the informing agent of intelligence. Two teachers, side by side, wrestling with the rudiments of Latin, will, the one send half the class out of school by the end of the year, the other have a phalanx ready to march on conquerors of every difficulty which may beset them in life. There was once a girl, a bright child, led on to high school with much effort, by her Sunday-school teacher, for the child came of illiterate parents. She had gone inspired with a desire to prepare herself for college, but struck on the rock of Latin paradigms. Ready to leave school and hunt a job, she went to see her old Sunday-school teacher, to tell with actual regret that she could not make the grade. But her friend was a wise woman. She did not waste time arguing the financial advantages of a college degree over a job to be obtained by a discouraged fifteen-year-old girl, but merely reached across her desk for a friendly blue Teubner Virgil, and began to read to the girl, here and there, in Latin or English as the mood struck her, adding bits of information about *Sortes Virgilianæ*, the place of Virgil in the Middle Ages, and finally the *Fourth Eclogue* and its story. Together they translated it, word for word. Other choice bits followed, from Horace and Martial to Lucretius; from the Vulgate Gospels to some of the stately Latin hymns, familiar to the girl in their English versions. She went away, her resolution to leave school gone. In a test a week later she made an A grade, nor did she ever fall below thereafter. Her teacher said she had decided to get down to business. When it was suggested that the Latin class might like to know something more than the dry bones of

what they were studying, the teacher was shocked, and feared to cast pearls before swine.

Of course, for the first time in her life, Latin became a living reality to the girl, a language in which men had written wise and lovely or gay and witty thoughts. The drudgery of the present was lost in the vision of days to come, when the possession of the Latin tongue was to be a gateway to a land of delight. There is no other reason for struggles with grammar and paradigms. The drill theory of education was invented to cover up the massive stupidity of poor teaching.

An intelligent system is a contradiction in terms. A system is a poor substitute for a dying reality. The more system, the worse teaching. No one can do good work under a perpetual espionage. It is the *raison d'être* of inspectors to find fault and to alter, in order to justify their salaries. That is only human nature, but it is death to constructive teaching. A really able teacher will do one of two things, get out of teaching permanently, or leave for some place where she can breathe. And worst of all is the oft-seen plan whereby inspection and superintendency are committed to raw youths just out of college, or ponderous "educators" who never taught a class in their lives, and could not to save their souls. No wonder the teaching profession does not hold long those who enter it. I remember an illuminating experience in my own early days of public school employment. There was a handsome young specimen of the masculine persuasion arriving at the same time as myself. I had little faith in men teachers, remembering the conditions in my school days, when we ran over the men teachers pretty much at will. I found this person was to have a room next to my own, which increased my dismay. As the year wore on, and I found it often necessary to keep order not only in my room, but in his, I liked his neighborhood still less. He had an aggravating trick of departing for the library when matters got too warm, knowing that in self-defense someone would come in and reduce his hoodlums to subjection. Needless to say, he was not re-engaged at the end of the year; but he promptly got a place as superintendent of schools in a town not very far away. Picture the humiliation of soul at being obliged to take directions from such a creature!

It is a singular fact, occasionally seen by shrewd observers, that the most autocratically ruled institution is the so-called democratic public school. The whole motivation is fear, inevitable in a system, indeed. The fear motif has many ramifications. Offered a well-equipped and a mediocre teacher, the superintendent will, in nine cases out of ten, hire the mediocre, lest the abler woman "have ideas", and be difficult to handle. I sat in an agency office, a while ago, and listened to the comments of superintendents consulting with the head about prospective teachers. Not once did I hear teaching ability mentioned.

In the same office, some years before, I was offered a place to teach Spanish, not because I know the language, for I do not, but because they needed a good disciplinarian, and Spanish happened to be the vacant subject. Although I protested I could not teach a language I had never studied, they offered additional salary as an inducement to take the post! On the whole, the public gets about as good schools as it demands.

Can a teacher teach intelligence? Formally, no; informally, most assuredly. But we must have a change of heart in the matter of what constitutes education. The bane of the schools today is ideas. The superior teacher is afraid to show her real ability, lest she rouse the jealousy of someone, very likely the superintendent or inspector, and be forced to make personal research into the problem of unemployment. The woman who would hold her job is the one who sticks most closely to the schedule and the inspired dicta of the superintendent, no matter what Juggernaut such a course may prove to the helpless and hapless children thus sacrificed to stupidity. If she cannot make such a compromise with her conscience, she must go into business or private school teaching. We need a revision of our school system which will place the emphasis upon the teacher, if a system we must have. The buildings may be but long sheds, and the seats but pine planks, but we shall have a better school.

The Mark Hopkins Little Red Schoolhouse idea, says a nervous superintendent. Very fine indeed, save that to-day we have to watch out for the Little Red School teacher. Even so, and one of the reasons that we have the Little Red School teacher with us today is because we have made the schoolroom next to

impossible for the teacher who is true blue; because at the same time we have made her blue over the chilling officialdom which insists upon adapting the child to the Procrustean bed of the System.

It isn't hard to teach children to think, if they are not mentally deficient. It is harder to keep them from thinking, which is the reason why discipline is such a terror to some. Even the average stupid child will instal a self-starter, if he finds he can use it. There must be a teacher behind the desk who thinks, however, and such a one always finds that discipline takes care of itself. She gets the reputation of being a "cracker-jack disciplinarian", to quote the oddly incongruous description I once heard, without realizing herself just why or how. But the children know. They probably call her by some disrespectful nickname, the infant equivalent of "dead game sport," and adore her.

What is teaching children to think? What is the thought-process anyway? Roughly, it is the ability to observe, to analyze and synthesize, and to draw conclusions, as a basis of judgment and action. The popular and long-tried method is trial and error. Children inherit an aptitude for thinking, due to the fairly many generations since the human animal first distinguished himself by the process. But like many other aptitudes, it may be nurtured or suppressed by the environment. The ceaseless questioning of the child is proof that the thinking-process is alive and functioning. The person who has ceased to question is dying at the top.

I sometimes think of the child mind as a jungle, a luxuriant growth of tangled woods and vines. Beautiful things may come out of it, or noxious. It is pathless, disorderly, and the teacher's function is to find the way in, clear away the rank growths, and let the rare and lovely plants have an opportunity to thrive under the vivifying light of the sun. But the blooms to be found are often very delicate, and need gentle handling. Alas, that there are those who ruthlessly enter to destroy, on the specious plea that so is the child better-fitted for life! The contrary is in fact true, for then the child faces life with his one precious gift, his touchstone of beauty, his shield of truth, gone.

How find the road thither? I cannot pretend to tell. It



must be sought, patiently, lovingly, eagerly. For a group of young hoodlums it was the *Lays of Ancient Rome*. For freckled, stubby George, son of a city laborer, it was architecture. For Fred, over-running with energy, getting into a fight a day, and hence in perpetual really undeserved hot water, it was a study of birds. For Ben, rapidly developing into a lounge lizard from unwise parental affection and indulgence, it was the tale of English chivalry and valor, from the days of the Round Table on. (I saw, the other day, the memorial erected to his memory, by the town that once prophesied his downfall, for he gave his young life defending those Anglo-Saxon liberties we studied that eventful year.) And all of these were in a class assigned to English History, but under a wise and far-sighted superintendent, really devoted to teaching children. It does not matter what the subject may be, it is the object which counts.

We Americans want to do things in the mass. But that is the way of the mob. It is the unthinking way, it stupefies intelligence, it places the premium upon sheer force and weight, not delicacy and finesse. We are big and rather unwieldy, and we push forward by the momentum of inertia too often. That is why we have not assimilated our later foreign-born as we should. Our immigration troubles are due to this very flair for bigness, to the tendency to submerge the individual in the type or race. So we breed hurts, and discontents, and injustices. *Divide et impera* is still the way to conquer our difficulties. The undigested masses in the body politic must be broken up, that they may pass on their way into the blood and fibre of the nation. The teaching of each new generation is of course the business of the schools. But we must realize that men's souls are not cut from the same patterns.

We must simplify our total scheme, keep it as free as local conditions demand. We must realize that the true democracy is not contained in mass education, which provides opportunity only for the few whom it happens to fit, but in class education, which is adaptable, flexible, and able to give opportunity to each phase of human intelligence. John was up in police court, one day. I telephoned to the judge to see what could be done about it, for John was a bright enough lad, and not inclined to make mis-

chief. To tell the truth, the school work was too easy for him. He had too much time out of doors, and no one to guide it. His parents were well-meaning, hard-working people, nothing versed in the kind of life surrounding John. He was paroled in my custody, and I began to look into the matter of what the town had to offer a boy like him. Absolutely nothing. He would have liked to study chemistry and mechanical drawing, but those subjects were the property of boys who were going to college. The only course offering a livelihood at the end was the commercial course; and John's fingers were already several sizes too big for the keys of a typewriter! I didn't wonder that he felt the whole thing was piffling folly. I committed the educational heresy of deciding that more schooling was not to John's advantage, and found him an apprenticeship. Not that John could not have used more schooling, but the town had decided that all its children who must earn their own living should do so as stenographers and clerks. What utter folly, and what a wild disorganization of the labor market if something had not intervened! But did the public school give John the fair, equal chance that was his right as a citizen of a democracy? Did it give him a chance to develop what intelligence he had? No; it said, Take this or nothing. If it doesn't suit the kind of a brain the Lord gave you, that is not our fault.

We boast of being an educated people, but it is a foolish and an idle word, for which we need much mercy. The real need is a wholesale pruning and weeding of our school systems, beginning at the top, and a complete recasting in a truly democratic fashion, to meet real and not theoretic needs. And coördinate with such a reform is letting teachers teach. If they can not teach, they should go elsewhere, but they should be given every chance, and be the real backbone of the schools, instead of as at present the hirelings of the Board of Education. And as such a programme is too stupendous for even such a wealthy country as ours, let us have the good sense to welcome all private aid, for whatever class or craft it comes. There is no need to fear snobbishness or undue exclusiveness. If there seems to be a trace, life takes it out of most adults, with neatness and dispatch. The women who once cherished and practiced it are forgetting it in the new

fascination of cöoperating with their sisters in municipal house-keeping, and its doom will soon be sealed. It can only subsist by ignorance.

Prospecting for intelligence is great fun, and there are many more claims than we sometimes pessimistically guess. But a lot of them are passed over, because the searcher does not know how to uncover them, and a lot more never come to anything because there is no capital or skill for their proper development. That is why so many private schools exist, to meet the need we see but hardly understand. That is why too they have so much the superior teachers and hence teaching, for in them a capable teacher can actually teach, without fear of let or favor. The text-book teacher, bound by rule and rote, is a product of an iron-clad régime, and can rise no higher than her source. The true pedagogue is a child leader, not a child driver. To such a one the classroom is an adventure, a thrilling quest for gold, in company with those yet clear eyed and unspoiled of earth.

The pity of it is that every child cannot be one of a like goodly company. If evolution be indeed the passage from homogeneity to heterogeneity, the public school as we have it is a retrogression, for it aims at taking minds biologically and spiritually variant as the stars in heaven, and turning them out as near a uniform product as is humanly possible. Free education is not to be interpreted in a financial sense only, it must be free to create, to vivify, to guide, and last of all, to inform, that precious entity, the mind of the child. Only thus indeed can we make our civilization safe for democracy, for an unthinking democracy forms an easy prey to the unscrupulous demagogue, and the cruelty of the mob. Variety, dietetic experts tell us, is not only the spice of life; it is absolutely necessary to physical health. It is quite as necessary to mental health, and hence to national well-being. We must uncoil this monster of mediocrity and unintelligence which is fastening itself with ever more ponderous ineptitude upon the most vital spring of the life and promise of our civilization.

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